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Stalling Life

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in
Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia
Commonwealth University.

By

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, Maryland Institute College of
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Director: Carlton Newton, Professor and Interim
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Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, VA

May 2013

Acknowledgements

To Zac, John, and Kennedy, who, unstoppable, upheld the torch.

To my father, who never questioned my choices and is patiently waiting for me to finish.

To Amy Hauft, Kendall Buster, Adrian Wong, Elizabeth King, and Gregory Volk who have consistently been willing and able to follow a thread to almost anywhere.

Most of all, to the enduring minds and genuine sensibilities of my peers: Sacha, Lior, Carl, Rotem, and Tom.

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Abstract

Stalling Life

By Leslie Rogers, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013.

Major Director: Carlton Newton, Professor and Interim Chair, Sculpture + Extended Media

Using a diagram, glossary, anecdotes, and first-person narrative histories, I explain how I use sculptural installation, image making, and serendipity to exploit the illogical to the point of meaningful.

Meaningful

James Lipovac, an early painting professor, said in our final academic meeting, “I think that you’re an artist first, a painter second, and it’s going to take a long time to figure out the rest.”

Erik Ruin, the ultimate skeptic and a prolific self-taught artist, has made two observations over the years that landed with perfect clarity, and stuck. They are, “Your sense of humor is perverse,” and, “Your femininity is like that of a drag queen.”

Ellen Nielsen, a friend from my education whose memory for information far overshadows my own and is unmatched, has tried persistently to determine why we remember entirely separate details from shared experiences. She finally observed, “You think in stories.” Ellen also coined the term, “Leslie Party” after the few parties I have thrown, at which people who would never be interested in meeting, or maybe prefer to avoid each other, show up and have a great time together.

Nate Andrews, a noise musician and ex-boyfriend, used to hesitantly accompany me to look at art once in awhile. He would inevitably find something deeply coded to approach, let’s say a clock with paint splattered on it, turn to me holding his chin, slowly nod with sly satisfaction, and say, “I get it,” then walk off.

Organized

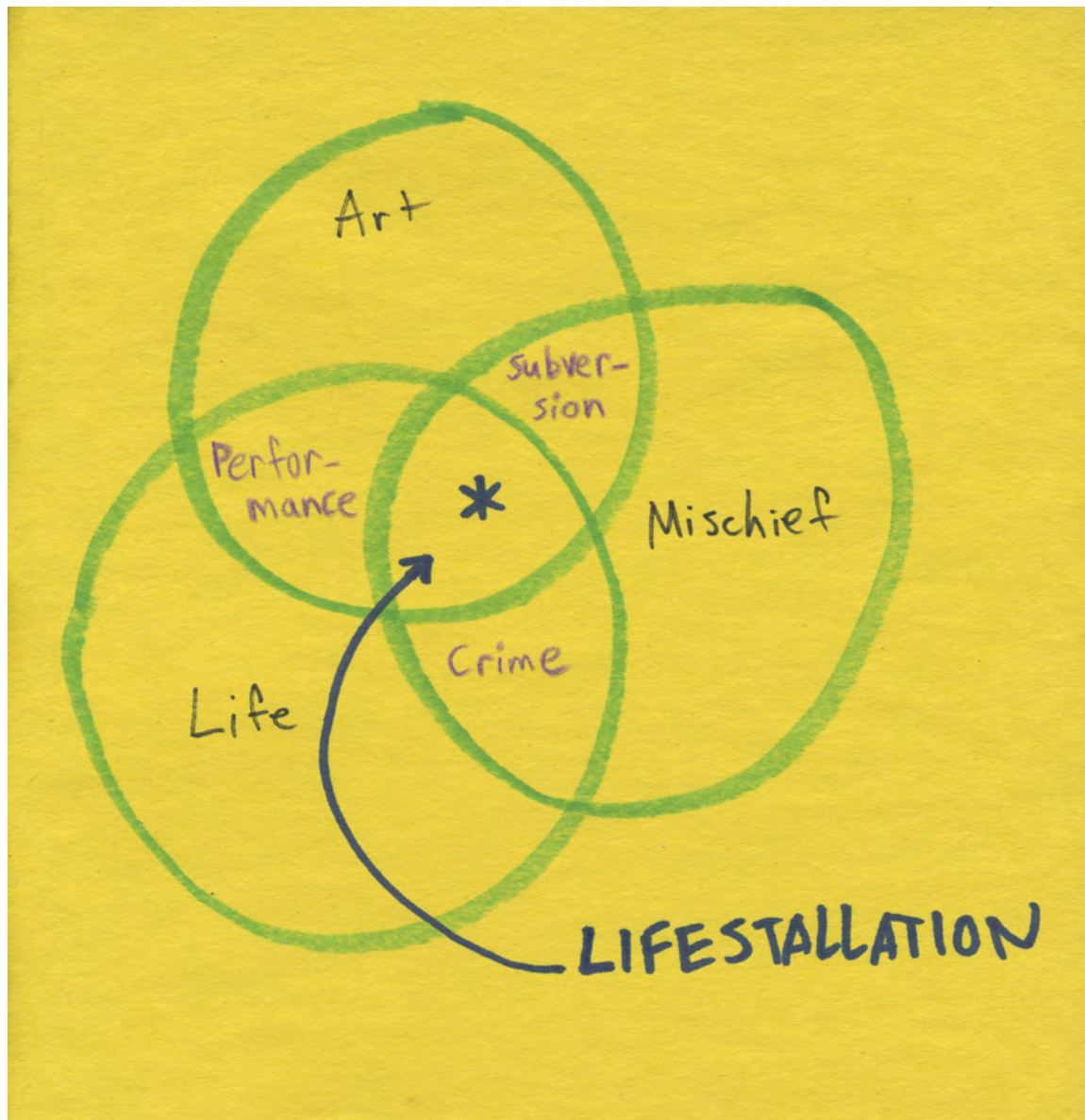


Fig 1. *Lifestallation Diagram*, 2011

...an illustration of completion. Satisfaction surrounded by its components and associated confluences, each individually lacking.

...a list, in the round

...a hoop-dream

...a three-leafed clover with a cartoon butthole in its epicenter, decorated with hot air.

Glossary

Primary Terms:

Art

An entity that by nature resists definition.

The activities by which we grapple with what is revealed, but escapes our logic.

Anything an art institution or its constituents intentionally present to the public.

Life

The activities, surroundings, and scenarios that we encounter, whether sought out intentionally or discovered chaotically and unintentionally.

Variables that we do not choose, but coexist with nonetheless.

Mischief

Entirely intended mis-applications, distortions, uncomfortable confluences, and debatably or blatantly inappropriate confusions, most often unsupported or without permission.

Secondary Terms:

Performance

A display of physicality for an audience, simultaneously disingenuous and earnest.

Subversion

To strategically subordinate, disregard, or hide high social or cultural status.

Crime

That which is against the law.

I showed an acquaintance the diagram. She said, “What about smoking pot at an art opening? Is that a lifestallation?” I responded, “No, that includes both life and mischief, but not art. It just happens to be close in proximity to some art. It’s only a crime, which is coincidentally also close in proximity to art in the diagram.”

When I’m bored or dissatisfied with an idea, I can look at this diagram, decide which lacking area the work is falling into, and determine what might bring it closer to the center. If I can’t come up with a solution, I move on.

The *Lifestallation Diagram* also helps me come up with language for the decision-making and insistence that is hardest to rationalize, to describe to someone else why it is just this exact way and not a little bit different, what is being balanced and in what way.

A Welcome Mat: on accessibility, appeal, and seduction

Yes you, whoever you are, you are welcome here.

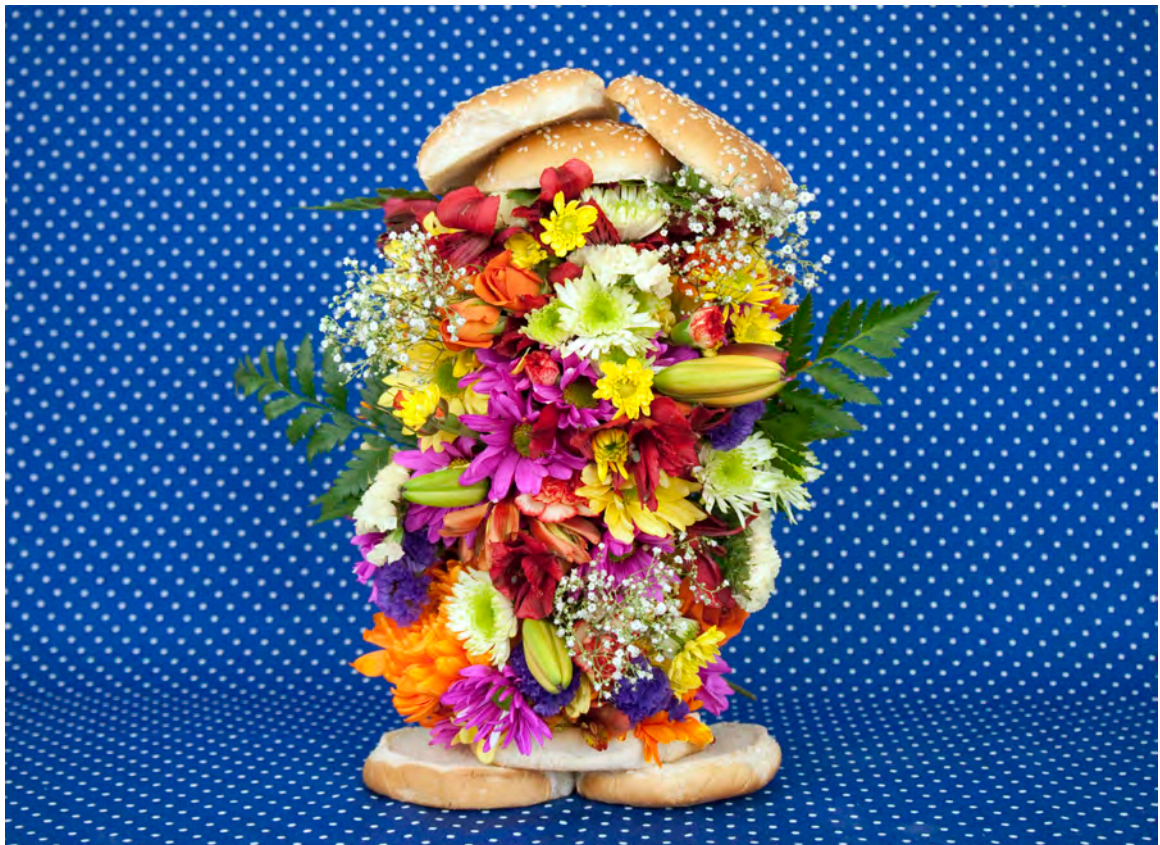


Fig 2. *Funerary Sandwich*, 2012

It's important to me that all of my work, at first read, forefronts some generalized impression of mass appeal, the aesthetic of accessibility. I find very few people comfortable even approaching contemporary art whose endeavors are not rooted in it. More often than not, I find extremely interesting thinkers and doers believing they are excluded as a potential audience, or

worse, insulted by what they see as intentional inaccessibility. In my experience, I think there is some legitimacy in these impressions, and truly want to avoid being identified that way. I want to be very clear that a viewer need not aspire to be conversant with contemporary art to consume my work. If asked, I think most artists would agree with this statement, but I am interested in saying it literally through an aesthetic sensibility. When someone ventures out of their normal activities to see an art show once in a blue moon, and leaves saying, “That was mostly boring, except for this one thing...” I want to come at the end of that sentence, like a Band-Aid. On a bad day, I can feel that same way when I go to see art, and really appreciate a Band-Aid, a welcome mat, when one is presented. I find it rude to wear on the viewer’s patience before making an offering, like lecturing a houseguest about my carefully culled interests before offering them a drink, not that I can claim to be innocent of such. I’m sorry, would you like something to drink?

Though any particular viewer could be appealed to in a variety of nuanced ways, I add surface layers to my work that come from a clear visual language of appeal:

- Bright colors
- Familiar imagery
- Materials and methods that are common, affordable, and easy to indicate
- Food
- Fun and/or jokes

- Symbols of beauty, i.e. flowers, vistas
- Creatures, figures
- music

Not everyone likes a welcome mat. Some, when presented one, are positive that there could be nothing of substance on the other side, and choose not to enter. No harm, no foul.

Is it true that when art is shown, but abstains from directly offering the viewer something to connect to, recognize, to love, hate, follow, to access, that means it is just being coy with a deeply sophisticated inquiry? I'm skeptical more often than not. I believe entirely avoiding the accessible is as easy and as often a cover-up for lacking purpose as glitter and puppies.

Whether or not a viewer takes me up on my offering, enters, and moves into a more immersive or contemplative mode, they turn away and move on, or enter and become conflicted about when to go, their agency is in play. The welcome mat indicates a moment of choice, and possibly the viewer's attitude toward accessibility. Illustrated by a polarity, attitudes range from appreciative to dismissive, which is worse than defensive or offensive. At risk of too great a stretch, I am curious, concerned, troubled, and pleased by the possibility that my work indicates a viewer's attitude toward accessibility in a broader societal sense: toward equality, humanity, elitism, etc. Each time I encounter an aversion to the decidedly likeable, I ask myself what, socially, is at play. Though I can rationalize, I don't fully understand what reason there is to go

through life choosing to be bothered by things simply because they are easy to like, by not allowing one's self to be seduced. One must relinquish a lot of self-control to be seduced, to access darkness, intimacy, or wild exuberance. Relinquishment hinges on trust, in the artist's intentions, the promise of return, in the stability of the viewer's sense of self in that moment, or any combination of factors. But what, really, is the danger?

As an anonymous friend says, "You only go around once." Of course, he uses this phrase to rationalize a growing debt accumulated by craft brews, restaurants, and designer socks, but it means more than that to me.

So I wonder, *what is at stake*? Identifying with lots of people by using art as a medium could mean that one is not special. It could mean identifying with people who are not as smart or sensitive, or important, or serious, who have nothing measurable to offer, who don't know about art. It could mean identifying with someone who is more accomplished in a different way, and we don't want to be compared. It could mean identifying with someone without similar interests or path, in which case the viewer may have naively mistaken him or herself for the audience and made an unintended connection.

What I Want

I like my work to give people who feel that they are part of very different audiences a platform on which to float in the same indulgent soup of sensorial entertainment; to identify, without standing face to face, or even meeting; to

gently be aware of the shared experience. I want a Leslie Party (see Ellen Nielsen in **Acknowledgements**).

I want viewers to excitedly or hesitantly enter the ambiance alongside strangers, understand that they can leave at any time, but believe that if they do, they're missing something; to choose and allow themselves to sense without thinking, to be mesmerized, drawn in deeper by a shifted tone or strange and unsettling, but somehow truly true-to-life, disjunction of content and affect, eventually choosing to leave at their decided pace, putting aside the opportunity to make any sense of it until they attempt to tell someone what happened, and come up short.



Fig 3. *All the Flowers*, 2012



Fig 4. detail from *Ghost*, 2012

Working With Others



Fig 5. *Haggle*, 2013

Fun greases the wheels of collaboration. Hence, a spirit of fun or silliness is prevalent in the products of many collaborative or collective groups with greater longevity that I've become familiar with, admire the working dynamic of, or identify with: Bread and Puppet Theater, The Missoula Oblongata, Wham City, Baltimore Annex Theater, The Miss Rockaway Armada, the now-deceased PIFAS (Philadelphia Institute for Advances Study), Bedlam Theater, Club Lifestyle, and my own group that I left in Philadelphia when I came here, PuppeTyranny.

Sometimes, in the collaboration, we slip into a mode in which we're only thinking about each other as the audience. In such cases, the audience becomes a very intimate association. In a live performance, despite our best efforts, the audience can also be quite small. If we leave some element of chaos in the mix, something that may or may not work, or is intended to come together in the presence of the audience, that begs for a particular reception, they become implicated as individuals. We can't help but look out at them, recognize them. The nuances of their responsive or unresponsive energy suddenly pull a lot of weight, becoming directives. Similar to the development process, in which we depend on each other's responsive energy to adopt proposals, roll the ball bigger and bigger, grabbing onto better-than-perfect accidents, and leaving lackluster pieces behind when no one cares enough, the live performance becomes a development space again, when the audience is small enough for individuals to matter.

Outside of collaboration, a flagrant aesthetic of fun in my individual practice persists, like a salve for the difficult and generous favor another person provides when involved in my solo work, lacking a pretense of collaboration. Often, I prefer it this way in order to make the best work. I can't see myself from the viewer's place, literally and figuratively. A trusted second opinion is the next best thing, but it is unlikely that anyone will feel secure with the authority to tell you that you're not fulfilling your intended purpose in your own work. Finding someone who would feel confident about an observation like that who I also believe could understand the picky, inarticulate nuance of what feels right to me, is next to impossible. In this context, I'm best off with an element of serendipity, in which I happen to know and trust someone who is perfect for the scenario that I have set to unfold in a mostly predetermined manner. In a perfect serendipity, there is something special about them that will make what little I haven't predetermined more promising than I could have designed. For those contributions, I am most indebted.

All the Flowers Are Mine (Fig 3), originated when I visited Echo Park in Los Angeles. I saw gigantic roses growing, and thought *those are the size and shape of really big burgers, or maybe my stomach*. I had this incredible image in my mind of someone biting into one like a sandwich. It was a beautiful, but difficult to watch kinetic close-up, with sound. After enough research for reassurance, I found that it was safe to eat roses grown without pesticides, as well as lots of beautiful flowers. Eating a meal consisting entirely of the edible parts of the plant

is a safe and possible reality, but seems inappropriate according to our immediate conception of what is and is not food. The possibility was real and plausible, but somehow escaped logic (see **Glossary**, Art, second definition). I thought that it would be too comfortable to view as a video or photo, and in any lens-related format, would be too hard to pull out from under the great canopy of advertisement into the deadpan strangeness that I wanted to couple with the image's sensual and symbolic beauty. I decided it had to be encountered in person, and could benefit from a good reason to exist, a spirited event with a tone antithetical to a flower's delicate sentimentality: an eating contest.

Before coming to Richmond, I was trying to source roses grown without pesticides, or determine if I had time to grow and harvest enough of them at once to pull it off before the move. There wasn't enough time. Also, I was hung up conceptually on choosing the two people who might agree to be in competition. It didn't make sense that I would be one of them because I'm in charge of the event and it would seem rigged, or fake; too far from life, from a convincing competition. I searched for professional competitive eaters in the region and researched how much money they were used to winning, but the only two I found were coincidentally both very small Japanese women in their early thirties. Including them, in relation to my social identity, would beg for conceptual implications that I was neither prepared for nor interested in. I shelved the idea.

A semester into my time at VCU, I was at a bar with some other grads, and someone started passing around Sacha and George's driver's licenses. Though we see each other often, no one would have predicted that their images could be nearly interchangeable. It was such a strange coincidence, so I asked them if they would be interested in doing this for me, and they agreed.

Solely because it would be presented at a school critique, which is durational by nature, and carries a distinctly different gaze than a more active, chaotic, ongoing exhibition event, I thought it required the premise of a contest in order to charge the action, and have a reason to start and stop. In critique, the duration that the audience watches is essentially predetermined, and that length should be addressed in some way. I would do away with the contest if I showed the piece in the future alongside other active work in an exhibition space. The two people would just sit and eat flowers over the course of the evening. If it were the only performed piece in a room with installed work, I predict that people would group around it, awkwardly waiting for the plot to unfold. With ongoing performance scenarios, this is a huge hurdle. Ideally, in a space containing other simultaneous, ongoing performed works, it would be more clearly intended as an active image for meanderers. I hope to show it this way in two upcoming exhibitions.

Hungry Butt Undies: BLT on Marble Rye (Fig 6) is an idea I had at seventeen. I was entertained, but didn't take it seriously enough to execute. I thought, *I will sell a pair of underwear at Spencer's Gifts that makes it look like your butt is*

eating a sandwich, including a temporary tattoo that would turn your butt into a face, then forgot about it for the next ten years. At our preliminary meeting about producing the department's bi-annual publication, *Curious*, Siemon Allen warned us about common pitfalls in page formatting. He said, "Avoid the gutter," meaning the space on the page closest to binding, continuing, "Things get lost in there." I thought *there must be a way to make the most of this feature*. Then, in a conversation about bad tattoos, someone who prefers anonymity said, "I have ants on my butt." I responded, "Why? Is there food in your butt or something?" and immediately remembered *Hungry Butt Undies*. I asked her for a favor, and she obliged as a last hurrah before getting another tattoo to cover the ants. I am never more assured than at the moment when serendipity strikes.



Fig 6. *Hungry Butt Undies: BLT on Marble Rye*, 2012



Fig 7. detail from *Ghost*, 2012

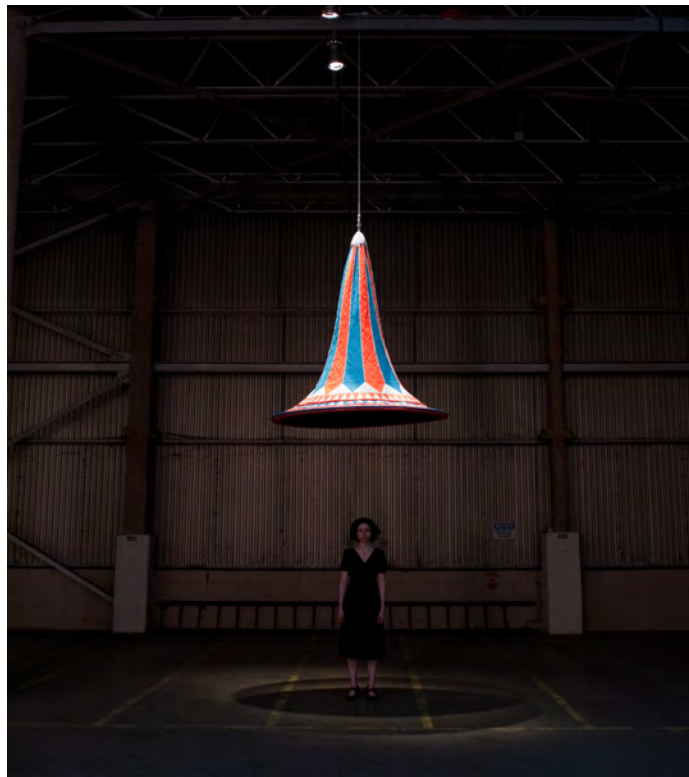


Fig 8. detail from *Ghost*, 2012



Fig 9. study for *Ghost*, 2012



Fig 10. *Ghost*, 2012

My candidacy piece, *Ghost* (Figs 4, 7-10), came from a long search for an idea that I found appealing conceptually, thought was alive enough, contained some kind of reveal or discovery for the viewer, was logistically plausible, and I found aesthetically appealing. Its development went through many phases of near-satisfaction, at the end of which I was only sold on a gouache illustration, so I began constructing its depiction in a timeline-necessitated need to move forward, regardless of the fact that I didn't know how to bring it to a satisfactory state.

The next phase was dependent entirely on the exhibition space: a gigantic, empty, concrete and corrugated metal box. The acoustics in the space demanded sound. It was like a gargantuan resonator. I don't know what constitutes notions of good or bad sound, but I liked it. The more I worked in the space, the less successful I was in disregarding the option. I wanted to find someone who practiced a traditional style of a capella from the nation of Georgia. I've been exposed to it over many years by a small, loosely formed group of practitioners in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, and have since upheld it as the most powerful human sound I've encountered. Recordings have never done it justice for me. The way that voices harmonize isn't akin to what I know from music, or music class. They maintain a perfected dissonance, like a synced group howl more akin to the empathetic effects of voice than to music.

I searched the region for Georgian singers, telling myself I would only include sound if I found someone really good. Otherwise, I would install the piece as

static textile sculpture and produce an environment. *Ghost's* is as wide as it is tall, pulling it away from costume and toward figure sculpture.

Then, during a studio visit, I learned of Antonia Fisher Duke, a local opera-trained singer who had developed a technique she called *Vox Saw*, in which she mimics the sound of a musical saw. I invited her to the space. Without requesting that particular technique, I described the type of sound I had been looking for, what I wanted to avoid (words, for example), and that I thought it best to first explore some things that she's familiar with and enjoys doing to search for compatibility. She demonstrated a variety of options. I had been regarding the figure sculpture in progress as a cheap bed sheet ghost costume rendered as a quilt, a bell-shape with eye holes extruded from a *Farmer's Fancy* quilt pattern, local to Richmond, for posterity and relevance. Coincidentally, Antonia's *Vox Saw* technique could be interpreted as an incredibly rich, high fidelity rendering of a cartoon ghost sound effect, like those from Halloween porch decorations, but diamond encrusted. Serendipity. Ideally, I wanted the performance to be as continuous as was sustainable throughout the opening. Antonia could sing for fifteen minutes at a time without straining her voice, so we determined that she would alternate resting and singing at 15-minute increments. Her clear voice filled every corner of the space, at any volume. No matter how still she was, the piece remained physically animated with her presence.

Though I intended not to be physically involved in the final product, I couldn't solve the problem of getting her in and out of the costume without operating it, and didn't know well enough how that might work to coordinate with a third, unknown person. I decided to do so as a stagehand that raises and lowers the piece over her with rope and pulley, stepping in to hook or unhook it, and then stepping out of the picture. Afterward, much of the feedback was about the intensity of our dynamic, which surprised me. I had forgotten how charged two people are when presented as simply engaged with one another.

Most recently, I finished *Haggle* (Figs 5, 11) for my thesis exhibition. The idea to extrude a pre-existing quilt pattern into a representation of a natural landscape has been nagging at me for an indeterminate length of time. I found an unnamed, hexagonal pattern with radial symmetry in my files, reproduced and manipulated it with 3-D modeling software in order to extract a sewing pattern that reconstructed my idea of a stylized mountain range, with a valley in the center that would be used as a stage. I had already produced a quilted hot-air balloon costume, meant to snap under the crotch of a performer like a diaper, and be supported by a helium-filled weather balloon instead of a rigid armature. Large wearables are usually cumbersome and strenuous to operate. My intention was to allow the performer the fullest range of motion from the waist-down and the most stamina. With the physically largest elements determined, I moved onto solving the scenario. I knew that I wanted to continue working with a paired-down interpersonal dynamic. Serendipity came most easily this time around. Normally,

the performer is the riskiest and most unpredictable element in the culmination of a piece. In this case, choosing this pair was the most reassuring decision I made. I was positive that their presence would come to full fruition. It was a longer-term risk nonetheless, because I was asking them for a huge and difficult task. I needed to avoid wearing their patience thin with the difficulty of their roles, risking our future working relationships and friendships. They needed to feel the reward of progress in the presentation of the piece in order to ensure its longevity.

I'm close with the two performers that I chose to ask, Zac Palladino and Mark McCloughan. They are very close with each other as well. They have a brilliant wit and domino-effect banter in their pre-existing friendship. They are both originally dance trained and mutually supportive of each other's complementary theatrical endeavors, but had never before performed together, except during one impromptu accident, witnessed only by me and a handful of others.

Mark does a piece with his group NoFace titled *The Beautiful Refrigerator is Empty*, which has developed over three years from a ten minute act into a two hour monologue and occasional dance that has toured the continent. He plays Teena, an aggressive, seductive, deeply evil teenage girl who wears a pencil skirt, heels, and is eternally topless. He was in a long, quiet, serious scene on a very small stage that Zac had to cross in order to be ready to mount the next act. Zac put on a costume, meaning someone else's mis-buttoned flannel shirt, and stormed out on the stage in the character of Teena's disheveled and completely

broken father, throwing some furniture and growling her name over and over, asking why she insists on being this way. The scene went on, and though it was hilarious, the room fell silent afterward with our nodding heads and mutual recognition that a great discovery had been made. They hadn't since had an opportunity to work together.

For this piece, I knew I wanted to simply exploit a paired-down dynamic that come somewhat from a fantastical reality produced by me, and at times from the same room that we're all standing in. I decided that Zac would wear the balloon because his improvisation tends to be less dramatically changing, and his experience with puppetry makes him very articulate with objects, as well as with any part of his body. Also, his chubby little legs would look great. A second character costume for Mark didn't seem right, because he tends to really get rolling with a lot of options, and loves dressing up in order to fuel intention.

Prior to their arrival, I worked intensely with a friend and local musician, Nelly Kate, to fill the acoustic environment and create promising options for them to manipulate, building and depleting a soundscape. She had asked in the past if I would like to work together, and I didn't see the opportunity until I watched her score a silent film in a style that was very different from the music of hers that I had heard. The live film score was very close in mood, impact, and ambiance to what I was hoping for.

We brought an amp and microphone into the space on a few occasions. I kept track of the sounds she made during the film scoring that were closer to something I would like to hear in the room. I would describe to Nelly in laymen's terms the kind of sounds I imagined determining the range of moods, she would propose some things, and I would express my preferences. She went off to record, came back with another range of proposals, I gave feedback, and so on. I believed that sound would be more articulate directive than anything I could say. We came up with six tracks that Zac would control from inside of the mountain structure. He could mix the soundtrack at will by turning each speaker-peak's volume up or down relative to one another with knobs poking out of the mountains. Sound is Zac's main method of influencing their exchange.

Mark is able to manipulate the event through changing his costume whenever he wants, choosing from a variety of versatile wearable pieces. Some I made before he arrived, and some upon his request during the days preceding the exhibit. Though less imposing in stature, he is able to move more freely and in wider variety of ways.

I believe that sound is very sensitive time-based work. In addition to determining the best intentional sound, a buzzing light fixture, loud fan, nearby party, or the wrong architectural acoustics can subconsciously obliterate the reception of a work encountered in nearly any immaterial way. I knew sound would be essential to pace an audience through this likely awkward improvised exchange between

performers, and that it would be a great deal of what Zac and Mark had to rely on when they got bored, detached from each other, or ran out of ideas. I was fortunate to have Nelly on board, who understood all of that and took the task to heart.

I assumed that because there was no intended progression of plot and there was so much other work to see that night, people wouldn't stay long, maybe three to seven minutes, maybe twenty on a rare occasion. I was surprised to see that maybe half of the people who entered stayed for more than forty-five minutes, some for a full hour and a half, meaning that they came early on and didn't leave until I ended the performance. During gallery hours next day, the performers returned and we received a similar style of viewership. My fear is that people stay even when they don't want to, which I do see as a choice they are responsible for, but want to avoid soliciting. I've asked a number of people if they thought that was possibly happening. They've reassured me that it's not, but I maintain some suspicion.

Leading up to the opening, I was trying to get all logistics out of the way other than playing with all of the stuff in order to develop a rapport. Of course, as one material reality needed addressing after another over the short install, time to develop the performance was seriously chipped away, which was devastating to me. By the time the live performance was nearing the end of gallery hours on its second day, I took note that the dynamic had developed much more quickly with

the new, tiny audience. I realized that the product I had maintained was the moment of collaboration that I look forward to the most, in which serendipity plays a part in the best ideas. With a very small audience in the room, we all forget about any premise, where point B was supposed to be in the first place, and discover the full potential what we have between us and the things at hand, keeping only one another's pleasure in mind.



Fig 11. details from *Haggle*, 2013

Vita

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